

STRANGE BUT TRUE

Cattle rustlers

How a stamp which was intended to symbolise the Wild West of America actually bore a picture of the Highlands of Scotland

□ Report by James Mackay

Born at Slateford in Midlothian in 1839, John MacWhirter was something of a child prodigy. Having enrolled at Scotland's very first art school, he exhibited his first painting at the Royal Scottish Academy when he was only 14.

In his lifetime he enjoyed a huge reputation as an etcher, illustrator and painter of the Highland landscapes which were fashionable in the late 19th century.

Today, however, he is chiefly remembered for one of his paintings which was reproduced on a USA stamp, despite having absolutely nothing to do with America!

In 1898 the United States Post Office decided to issue a set of nine stamps to celebrate the Trans-Mississippi Exposition. Most of the motifs were engraved from contemporary photographs, but the odd one out was the \$1 value.

Allegedly this depicted 'Western Cattle in a Storm'. Showing a bull forging ahead through the snow, with a herd of cows in his wake, it certainly implies a scene from the Wild West.

In fact, though, the image was lifted from MacWhirter's painting



ABOVE: The 1898 USA Trans-Mississippi Exposition \$1, showing Isle of Skye cattle

The Vanguard, and shows Highland cattle on the Isle of Skye.

MacWhirter made many Continental tours, and at least one prolonged trip across North America, producing numerous landscapes and genre scenes. But this wasn't one of them.

He was still at the peak of his career when his painting was 'lifted' by the US Post Office. It's not known whether he protested at this artistic piracy. Indeed, he may not even have been aware of it.

MacWhirter died in Edinburgh in 1911. The McWhirter twins who created the *Guinness Book of Records* were his great-grandsons. □